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THE HIGH-SCHOOL BOY'S MORALS

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To one who has had experience with boys in American secondary schools, the most striking and significant thing observed in a visit to the famous Rugby School is the absence of lockers in the cricket clubhouse. Arranged on long benches or tables are open bags containing the clothing and other paraphernalia of the game and on each bag are the initials of the owner. It is evident that the knowledge that an article belongs to another boy is sufficient guaranty that it will be unmolested. The claim that the public schools of England are attended only by the sons of gentlemen seems justified. The term gentleman as thus applied stands for more than membership in an aristocracy either of birth or of wealth; it includes an accepted standard of honesty and sportsmanship higher than we have as yet attained, higher almost than we have dared to hope for among the boys of our public and private secondary schools.

Contrast with this typical situation in an English public school—which, it should be observed, is not a public but essentially a private school according to our meaning of the term—the condition in our own schools. Not only is the American high-school boy often without the moral standard which prevents the appropriation of articles not his own which are within his easy reach, but steel-maker and locksmith have not yet devised a locker which is strong enough to withstand his strength or ingenuity. Nothing that is not nailed down is absolutely safe. Not all boys in all schools are thieves, but there is often current, even among those whose moral standards are fairly high in other respects, a fine distinction between “swiping” and stealing which defies definition but which is appealed to in defense of delinquencies of this sort. One sometimes meets an attempt to explain the situation on the ground that our democratic social order throws together in the same school boys from

homes of culture and the sons of immigrants and others of low social standing. One might accept this as an explanation, in part at least, did not experience show that it is not always Isaac Goldstein or Pietro Luigi who is caught with the plunder but quite as often those whose names have a more patrician ring. The writer was speaking before a meeting of parents in an aristocratic suburb on the moral phases of high-school life, and in the discussion that followed one gentleman felt called upon to defend the moral standards of his community by claiming that any such condition as I described was due to the presence in the school of the children of foreigners. After the meeting closed a teacher in the high school told me that the worst case of thieving which had come to light during the year was the son of the clergyman of the leading church in the town.

Another form of the same practice is seen in the collection of souvenirs of every sort made by boys while on athletic trips or in the towns where boarding-schools are situated. Street signs, silverware, towels, and even bedding from hotels and dining-cars are considered fair plunder and often adorn the rooms in school and college dormitories or serve more practical purposes. A college alumnus recently told me that the waning supply of towels and bedding in his fraternity chapter house was always renewed at the close of the tour of the glee club, from the unofficial proceeds of the expedition. The football team of a well-known school on arriving at its destination was obliged, in order to avoid arrest, to surrender a motley collection of articles "swiped" from the dining-car *en route*. A few years ago, on one of the long trips which are sometimes taken at the season's end to determine which of two teams representing regions far apart is superior, a certain high-school team not only secured athletic fame but wide notoriety as well by reason of the wholesale plunder gathered along its route.

In athletic contests there are perhaps afforded the most frequent exhibitions of dishonesty. This has most often to do with the eligibility of players. Last summer in the public-school league of one of our largest cities a controversy arose over the age of one of the players. A comparison of the records which he had made in two schools revealed the fact that between the first high-school

record and the last he had in some manner lost a year from his life. There were presented in the case various documents including statements from the boy's parents and family physician to show that the first record was an error, but after long and careful investigation the boy was declared over age and was debarred from playing. The moral injury in cases of ineligibility is often shared not by one or two but by many, sometimes by a whole school, who feel that they must if necessary lie not once but many times, to defend what they are pleased to call the honor of their school. The damage is thus all the more insidious because it involves the exercise of a generous instinct of loyalty to one's school. Cases are not infrequent in which persons in authority in the school have guilty knowledge of the facts. Sometimes it would seem that they are accomplices in fraud. Some years ago the writer knew of the case of a young instructor who was given charge of a baseball team on a trip to another school, who actually played on the team, assuming the name of one of the boys. The youth of the teacher, together with the fact that as coach of the team he felt an unusual desire for its success, may be given as explanation but not as excuse for his conduct. The same could not be suggested to cover the case which came to my attention not long ago. A boy with his father came to my office to arrange for his entrance to the school. In the course of the interview the conversation led to his life in the school from which he came, a school whose published announcements lay claim to consideration because of the strong moral influence exerted upon its boys. The boy referred with pride to the fine record of their football team, saying that they had never lost a game on the home ground, although on one occasion it had looked as if they would lose the game when their principal, whom he called by name, had put into the game under an assumed name a former graduate of the school of great fame on the gridiron. His skill at the game led to the discovery of his identity and his removal from the game. I was much struck by the fact that this incident seemed in no remotest way the cause for the contemplated change of schools in the mind either of the father or of the son.

However demoralizing some of these conditions in public or private schools are, they can hardly equal those existing in some

Sunday-school athletic leagues organized for the purpose of promoting an interest in this department of church work. In public-school leagues more or less responsible control is exercised by authorities, but in the case of Sunday-school athletic competition this is largely lacking. In a certain city the rivalry between schools has led to a great influx of lusty boys for the two Sundays of attendance required by the rules of the league prior to the decisive contests. In this respect the effect is like that of the approaching picnic of former days. I noticed one morning in the list of winners of the events in the annual Sunday-school track-meet the names of a Jewish and a Catholic boy in my own high school. Calling them to my office, I asked them when they had joined the ——— church. With sheepish smiles they said that they had not joined the church but had entered the Sunday school two weeks before to help win the championship of the city. When asked if they thought this was in accordance with the standards of sportsmanship which we had been accustomed to maintain, they said, "No, we're just plain ringers, but we thought as it was a Sunday school it would be all right." Another case, reported on good authority, was of a boy who added substantially to the victory of a Sunday-school team who had never been in the school at all but had attended the required two Sundays by proxy, having sent another boy who registered under his name.

Another form of dishonesty to be found in most schools is seen in the relation of pupil to teacher. This appears in written work, in equivocating and false excuses for failure to meet the requirements of school routine, and sometimes in more flagrant forms, such as in forging credentials from one school to another. Boys who would not think of lying to a fellow-student do not hesitate to tell the most glaring falsehoods to their teachers. One is reminded of the student's definition of a college dean as quoted by Dean Briggs: "A man you lie to and get mad with for not believing you." And while one must commend the sense of honor which prevents a student from giving information against a fellow-student which would work to his damage, it is a matter for regret that the student who is known by his fellows to practice all sorts of deceit upon his instructors does not seem to lose caste among them.

My object in painting this dark picture is not to prove myself a pessimist, for an experience of twenty years in dealing with secondary-school pupils has made of me a thoroughgoing optimist. There is, however, nothing to be gained by refusing to see the facts. On the contrary, a recognition of the conditions is essential to the removal of what is wrong. What are the causes of this lack of moral discrimination among our boys and girls—for the case with the girls is not essentially different from that of their brothers? One who studies the situation is led to the conclusion that these instances are but illustrations of a fundamental lack of moral standards in our society at large. The boys are probably as honest in their sports as their fathers are in business. Many a parent not only does not think of censuring his son for these dishonest practices but even laughs at them as something smart and on the whole commendable. School boys naturally imitate the practices of college students, and the evils of college life are likely to be presented to him in more attractive colors than the serious side of the college student's life. They make a better story either for the newspaper or for conversation. The high-school fraternity owes its inception largely to this habit of imitation of college life. The elaborate codes of rules governing intercollegiate athletics reflect the evils which they attempt, often vainly, to remove. And the exhibition which faculty committees afford when dealing with charges of athletic ineligibility often reveal a situation of mutual suspicion between rival institutions and a desire to secure an advantage rather than to discover and act upon the real facts in the case. The immediate cause of most of the difficulties in athletics is the inordinate importance which the winning of the game has in the school boy's mind. For this we can hardly blame him when we consider that this is the general attitude of the public toward sports. Another source of evil is found in the prominence given to school-boy athletes by the newspapers in which they are placed before the sporting public in the same manner as prize-fighters and other professional athletes. Furthermore much harm comes to the boys who take trips half-way across the continent to settle the claims for the football championship of the entire country.

And what about the remedy in the case? The writer is not

prepared to accept for the school the entire responsibility for the cure of these evils, for they are too widely spread throughout our social order; but as a school man he is of the opinion that the school represents the most effectively organized agency for dealing with the immediate problem. It may fairly be said that neither the home nor the church exercises so effectual control over boys and girls during the period of secondary education as does the school. Of late there has been much discussion of moral education through the school. There is danger that while we are devoting much time to a discussion of the relative value of the direct and indirect method of moral instruction and of other more or less theoretical phases of the question we shall lose sight of the opportunity for practical moral instruction which is at hand.

In the last analysis it is simply a question of teaching a boy to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and to desire to tell the truth. Too much school discipline fails to discriminate between the essential and the non-essential. In some schools a boy would prefer to be caught telling a lie rather than smoking a cigarette. In a well-disciplined school, aside from certain outbreking forms of wrongdoing, no offense should be considered so serious as dishonesty, and even these grosser offenses may be less fundamentally serious though perhaps demanding more drastic punishment at the time. It should be understood that there is no offense that may not in a measure, at least, be atoned for by an honest statement of fact. Teachers too often attempt to "bluff" pupils whom they suspect of some misdemeanor and the pupils assume that in lying they are only employing the same method of defense. Straight-forwardness on the part of the teacher will more often be met by a similar response from the pupil. The writer once had reason to think that two boys had been guilty of a "rough-house" escapade. He called each to his office and told him frankly the reasons he had for thinking him guilty, stating that these were the only reasons; that he would take his statement as to whether he was guilty as true; and that if he were guilty punishment would follow. Each frankly acknowledged his guilt. Had another method been employed, I am convinced that each would have lied and I should have found myself in the embarrassing position in which we teachers

often find ourselves, convinced of a pupil's guilt but baffled in the attempt to secure a confession of it, and the boys would have gone out with less respect for the master on whom they had been able to "put one over." As it was they went from the office and reported that they had been treated "on the square." Most boys have an innate sense of fair play, and it is possible to develop among school boys a feeling which regards truthfulness as courageous and lying as the sign of a "yellow streak." It is, however, possible to confront a pupil in such a way that there is strong likelihood that he will lie, whereas another method would save him from such an unhappy disaster. It is an occasion for searching of heart on the part of a teacher when he finds that a pupil has told him a lie.

The field of sport, as no other, affords opportunity for inculcating the spirit and practice of fair play in a school. The enthusiasm of the school centers about athletics. The captain of the eleven or the nine is the hero of the school. Consciously or unconsciously he is imitated by all the boys of the school. However crooked may be the practices of a school team, it is regarded as part of a boy's loyalty to his school to support the team against all rivals. A tradition for clean athletics is of priceless value in the moral life of a school. Happily, many schools have this. A well-known academy on the day following a great track-meet voluntarily sent back the trophy of victory because it had been discovered by the school authorities that one of their point winners had been ineligible. All the trophies proudly displayed on the walls of their gymnasium have not brought such honor to the school as this one which might have been retained had the moral standard of the school been less high. In another school, following the annual football game with its closest rival, it was discovered that a player on the winning team had been ineligible by reason of some scholastic requirement which had been overlooked before the game. A letter was promptly sent to the opposing school stating the fact and relinquishing the victory. And the rival school acknowledged this act of good sportsmanship but declined to accept the victory.

When athletics do not contribute to the moral development of a school it is because of a failure to recognize their value as a factor

in moral training when under responsible control. Boys should not be blamed for the evils of athletics which are often so apparent and are so much decried. School athletic teams are too often placed in charge of irresponsible coaches, whose personal morals are questionable, whose standards of sportsmanship are low, and whose reputation as coaches or as popular idols in the community depends upon winning games at whatever cost. This is in sharp contrast with the practice of the English public schools, in which the masters feel it as much a part of their work to share in the sports of the boys upon the playgrounds as to instruct them in the classroom. It is not difficult to trace to its source the real reason why sport is enjoyed by English school boys for its own sake and why the low standards of honesty and sportsmanship so often appearing in American schools are not found there. A few schools have recognized the value of physical directors of high character and clear insight into the moral significance of athletic games. A new type of expert is developing who promises to revolutionize the athletic life of our schools. In the place of the man who teaches boys how to commit a foul without detection or to beat the pistol at the start of the race, there is now appearing another who trains his boys to play the game within the spirit as well as the letter of the rules and inspires them with the belief that the team cannot afford to win a game by any other than fair means. And this spirit is quickly caught by an entire school, which thus shares the moral training which is first given to the members of the team. At the close of a most successful track season, the captain of the team said before the school that he was proud of the fact that all their trophies had been won by a team which had never committed a foul. And the statement was met with ringing cheers.

There is no one whose position makes him so powerful a moral factor in a school as the physical director. Not even the principal can do so much directly to clear the moral vision of the boys as the physical director who meets them in relations in which their real inner lives and motives are more clearly revealed. A good illustration of the incidental moral instruction which such a man may give came to the writer's attention. The student manager of a team was sent to secure some expensive articles of equipment.

He returned with one more than was ordered, and being asked why he had the extra one said, with apparent satisfaction at his managerial smartness, that he had noticed the clerk had given him one more than he had paid for but that he had not thought it necessary to call his attention to it. The boy was much surprised when he was told that he must return the extra article at once, and declared that it was not his fault but was "one on the clerk." But the boy finally did as directed, and learned that "the fellows have got to be on the square with the Doctor all the time." And the lesson given to this boy doubtless reached many others in the school, a lesson sorely needed in these days when petty graft is of such common occurrence. This case well illustrates the type of opportunity for sound moral training which comes to the physical director daily as he meets the boys in the gymnasium and on the athletic field. And it is because the occasions for this moral instruction do not have to be dragged in, but arise naturally in the activities in which the boys and the director work together with joyous enthusiasm, that his moral influence is more potent than that of any other school officer.

Every autumn many thousands of pupils enter our secondary schools from homes representing widely varying standards, their standards unformed but to be determined and made permanent during the years immediately following. In four years or less they will go forth to college or the work of life with a moral bent which will not subsequently be greatly changed. In these four years the school by its formal work and the social activities which center in it may and usually does influence them more profoundly than any or all other agencies. Teachers should see clearly the responsibility which is theirs for the moral training of these citizens of tomorrow and should receive from their communities the support which they need in the solution of these problems which confront us all.